



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS  
**HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION**

Old State House 150 Benefit Street Providence, RI 02903

Telephone 401-222-2678  
TTY 401-222-3700

Fax 401-222-2968  
[www.preservation.ri.gov](http://www.preservation.ri.gov)

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**Contact:** Sarah Zurier, RIHPHC, 401-222-4142, [szurier@preservation.ri.gov](mailto:szurier@preservation.ri.gov)

**INDUSTRIAL-SIZE HISTORY OF A MANUFACTURING GIANT:  
NICHOLSON FILE COMPANY COMPLEX LISTED ON NATIONAL REGISTER**

Nearly an entire block of industrial buildings in the Valley neighborhood of Providence has received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of architecture, engineering, and industry. Frederick C. Williamson, Chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added the Nicholson File Company Complex to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. Important examples of industrial architecture, the buildings of the Nicholson File Company Mill Complex are significant as the location of the world's first commercially successful manufacturer of machine-made files.

The Nicholson File Company Mill Complex is located on a roughly seven-acre city block defined by Acorn Street on the east, Kinsley Avenue on the north, Tingley Street on the south, and a spur rail line on the west. It includes 24 one- and two-story, predominantly brick and concrete buildings erected between 1865 and 1970. Nicholson File is one of several massive industrial complexes in Providence's Valley neighborhood. This district began to attract industrial

development as a result of the introduction of rail service in the 1850s and the rechanneling of the Woonasquatucket River in the 1860s.

Company founder William T. Nicholson was born in Pawtucket in 1834. He spent his early career as a machinist, manufacturing precision tools, jeweler's tools, and light machinery. The outbreak of the Civil War led Nicholson to initiate several new projects. He furnished tools and machinery to armories involved in the production of small arms; manufactured various parts for Springfield rifles; and produced rifling machines, lock plate edging machines, six-spindle drills, milling machines and revolving head lathes.

By 1864 Nicholson had received several patents for machine manufacture of files and rasps. A number of companies had attempted, with little success, to produce quantities of files that could compete in quality with the best imported, handmade files. Nicholson developed the machinery and the physical plant necessary to mass-produce his "increment cut file." Files made by Nicholson's machines featured uniform surfaces for more effective use and maintained consistent quality.

Nicholson developed a new plant to house the revolutionary file-making machines. He acquired land at the corner of Acorn and Tingley streets and designed the first buildings for the Nicholson File Company in 1865. These included a machine and packing shop; two long extensions that housed grinding, file drawing, and cutting operations; two engine rooms and a boiler house; and a file straightening building extending west from one of the engine rooms. By the mid-1880s, the plant grew to include an enlarged packing building, detached office, factory building, and machine room. Nicholson held 28 patents by this time.

In the 1890s Nicholson File Co. began to acquire competing file manufacturers around the country in order to convert them for specialized manufacture. By 1901 the Nicholson plants produced 120,000 files per day and employed 2,500. Their output accounted for 80% of the national market for files. William Nicholson died in 1893 holding 98 patents for various aspects of file manufacture.

The first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw significant expansion at the Providence plant, including the erection of a new forge shop, a grinding shop, an annealing shop, three concrete frame-cutting buildings, and a powerhouse. By 1916, the complex employed 1200 men, processing thousands of tons of steel into 700 different types of files ranging in size from smaller than a toothpick to 20” in length. After World War II, Nicholson File struggled with labor disputes and steel shortages. In 1958, Paul C. Nicholson, great-grandson of the company’s founder, announced that the Providence plant would close. He blamed a downturn in the global market and the major expenses for labor, benefits, unemployment compensation, and property taxes in Rhode Island. The Acorn Street property was purchased by Licht Properties in 1960 and has been leased to a variety of commercial and industrial tenants since that time.

The National Register nomination for the Nicholson File Company was prepared by preservation consultant Edward Connors. According to Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the RI Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, “Nicholson File was one of Providence’s manufacturing giants. Today the complex of historic buildings is part of the city’s architectural heritage. After rehabilitation is completed the site will continue to contribute to Rhode Island’s economic life.”

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning for Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Federal and Rhode Island tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private property listed in the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is the state agency responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.

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